

Radio New Zealand and the Internet: Ten years of transformation

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In 2007 I surveyed Radio New Zealand audience data to interrogate how its relatively new website was being used by listeners. That research found that ‘the majority of New Zealand users accessed the Radio New Zealand site to engage in activities complementary to the actual linear, geographical broadcast, while only around 10 per cent used the digital audio and time-shifting features of the website’ (Mollgaard, 2007). In other words, most users were there to download recipes, check out the book reviews and to read the news. Now, a decade later, I am revisiting the Radio New Zealand website to demonstrate how New Zealand’s only public broadcaster has met the challenges of digital transformation.

In a sense, Radio New Zealand has ‘rebelled against itself’ in creating a contemporary and captivating web experience for its current and emergent audiences, in the face of financial hardship, staff revolts and government indifference, which has been somewhat alleviated with the election of a left-leaning government in late 2017. I will argue that the key drivers of change at Radio New Zealand over the past decade have been a concerted drive realign itself to growing online audiences, the increasingly visual nature of media cultures, and the potentialities of new internet developments.

These factors have been complemented by a strong management vision of a ‘multi-platform’ broadcaster emerging from years of stagnation, a new desire to share content with other broadcasters and other content providers and staffing upheaval, starting at the very top. The changes at Radio New Zealand have not been easy, but 10 years on from my last close observation of Radio New Zealand’s internet activity, they have been critical to a resurgence in listening and engagement with the last commercial free public broadcaster left in New Zealand.

Radio New Zealand in 2007

In 2007 Radio New Zealand had three divisions – National Radio – a nationwide news and current affairs FM network, Concert FM, a classical music network and Radio New Zealand International – a service on shortwave to the South Pacific Island groups. It had a relatively new website (established in October 2005), which had won a Qantas Media Award for website design that year.

In 2006, Radio New Zealand commissioned a survey about how their new internet portal was being used. The results showed that few people were using the Radio New Zealand webpage. Those that did access the portal were using material that was complementary to the broadcast programme, rather than seeking out extra material that was being made available online. Of the 504 people over fifteen years old questioned in mid-2006, only 10 per cent had used the Radio New Zealand website in the previous four weeks. Of those that did:

- six per cent of those surveyed listening to audio on demand,
- three per cent listened to a live stream (the broadcast on the Internet),
- three per cent listened to the latest archived news (the last news bulletin stored on the website),
- one per cent listened to a podcast (edited broadcast audio, stored for later retrieval,)
- less than one percent accessing an RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feed (a way of automatically sending material to a nominated computer).

The rest had accessed the site to download text, find contact details, review schedules or to check information such as weather and news (RNZ, 2006).

The CEO of Radio New Zealand at the time, Peter Cavanagh, celebrated the new website as a triumph of ‘platform-neutral content provision’, while conceding that RNZ’s core audiences of 35+ listeners were habituated to accessing the organization’s content through the broadcast channels and therefore the website was under patronized. Speaking at a journalism conference in New Zealand in 2006, he highlighted the emerging class of ‘digital natives’ who would increasingly be the focus of RNZ’s web activities (Cavanagh, 2006).

Despite early enthusiasm and efforts in producing a sustainable website presence, RNZ was hamstrung by the election of a right-wing coalition

government in 2008, who would go on to freeze funding for public broadcasting for the next 8 years. This freeze was evidenced in stagnation at RNZ as costs grew due to inflation and depreciation as well as wage demands, but funding shrunk in real terms (Mollgaard, 2017, pp. 107-8). This stagnation was most noticeable online, as the RNZ web portal project slowed to a crawl and further innovation was abandoned to cover costs elsewhere. The website remained relatively stagnant in terms of design, usability, staffing and production for the next few years, while other similar organizations began to steadily add more and more content, platforms and usability features to their offerings.

WEBSITE SLIDES

Radio New Zealand Website 2.0: Changes at the top, changes in direction

A key competitor for RNZ news and current affairs audiences online was the Fairfax Media website *Stuff*, which by May 2015 had a unique monthly audience of 1,811,000 users, outranking YouTube in New Zealand (Fairfax, 17 April 2015). Key to this success was the Chief Editor at Fairfax, Paul Thompson, who spent four years building the *Stuff* brand and expanding its online offerings (Stuff, 14 June 2007). In September 2013 Thompson was hired by RNZ as Chief Executive Officer, replacing Peter Cavanagh after 10 years in the job. Thompson has become integral to the successful expansion and realignment of RNZ's internet presence, overseeing arguably the most critical shift in technological and cultural directions for the organization since its inception in 1936.

Thompson's commercial background was what most media pundits questioned, although the new CEO was adamant that he was not there to drive RNZ to becoming a commercial organization, stating 'that's not up for discussion,' and that being a state-funded public broadcaster was 'the absolute essence' of RNZ (Stuff, 14 June 2007). What Thompson was hired for was his digital media prowess. This was made clear by Richard Griffin, the Chairman of the Radio New Zealand Board of Governors who said 'we are always looking for innovation. He brings with him extraordinary experience on multi-level media ... the whole technology Paul has been donkey-deep in in Fairfax for a number of years is where we are going too'. It is clear that Thompson was bought into RNZ to speed up its move to a 'convergent' media organization.

CONVERGENCE SLIDE

According to McEwan (2017), convergence needs to be understood as more than technology, more than economics, more than politics and more than culture. In this formulation, the context in which the innovation is taking place requires the negotiation of the fluid dynamics of organizational structures, technological changes and cultural developments as essential to convergent processes. Developing on Robert Hassam's (2004) critique of convergence as a capitalist ideological construct that tends to reinforce, rather than challenge neoliberal economic and political 'reality', McEwan's insights provide for a contextual framework that can be used to examine what is happening at RNZ as it has become more internet-orientated, but not reliant on commercial success to pay for it (McEwan, 2017). Related to this is Vincent Mosco's vision of convergence moving beyond myth-making and into new relationships of media power. RNZ's transformation therefore gives us insights into how convergence can operate in the public good – expanding on Lord Reith's admonishment to 'enlighten, educate and entertain'.

There is a need to revisit our conception of convergence and its utility as the initial euphoria over the potential cornucopia of content and connections has been steadily eroded by the realities of commercialization of the internet. As Graeme Turner (2016) has pointed out, earlier conceptions of convergence were apolitical and somewhat naive, even becoming the 'playbook' for commercialization of the convergent media.

This can be seen in the earlier work of David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, who conceptualized the 'dual delivery' experience as 'hybrid or collaborative forms that often emerge during times of media transition'. This allows for the 'complex synergies that always prevail among media systems' (Thorburn and Jenkins, 2003, p. 3). These 'complex synergies' are now very much evident in the commercialization of media content across multiple platforms in environments such as commercial media websites, YouTube and Facebook. The interplay of notions of public good, content and audiences is less clear in these formulations of 'synergies' and 'hybridity', requiring a more nuanced approach to convergence as particular to public media organizations like RNZ, its goals and its audiences.

For Radio New Zealand, this has meant changes in all three aspects of technology, organization and culture. The organizational changes have been most evident in the new roles Thompson has created to move production from broadcast to multi-platform since 2013. Of note was the resignation of long-standing Chief New editor Brent Edwards in 2017. Edwards had been unhappy about a restructure of the RNZ newsroom that led to three redundancies. He was a 16-year veteran of the organization and 'absolutely supported a multimedia strategy', but not at the cost of job losses at RNZ (Edwards, 2017). His 'option was to resign', so he did (Edwards, 2017). Edwards advocated for a 'strategy based on very strong radio, an excellent website and video on demand ... underpinned by a commitment to public service journalism' (Edwards, 2017). Edwards was highly critical of commercial media moving away from 'traditional journalism' and into tabloid and 'click-bait' content and was concerned at the direction of RNZ as it laid off journalists to free up money to bring in more website editors, the only way RNZ could increase capacity in these areas under the funding freeze (Edwards, 2017).

The shift to multi-platform provision has seen new roles such as 'Multi-media Journalist', 'Homepage Editor', 'Content Producer', 'Podcast Editor' and various back-end digital content and network management positions advertised in recent years. The new left-leaning Labour-led Coalition campaigned on increasing funding to Radio New Zealand to pursue a 'Radio New Zealand Plus' strategy that would include a possible broadcast TV channel but would also significantly increase funding for public interest journalism and RNZ operations. This has resulted in a \$15 million boost to RNZ's budget from July 1st this year. How this will impact the organization is not clear yet, but several new roles in the newsroom and connected to shows have been advertised.

Another change has been the launch of a new online only channel aimed at younger people called *The Wireless*. **(Slide)** Launched on a relatively tiny budget of \$300, 000 in 2015, it has three fulltime staff and is tasked with connecting with people under 35 by covering music, culture, politics and society from a younger perspective. This has seen several new roles created for younger people within RNZ, further reshaping the organization.

CONTENT SHARING SLIDE

A critical change to RNZ has been an about-turn on how its content is shared with other providers. Prior to Thompson, RNZ jealously guarded its outputs and banned its presenters from appearing in other media. Thompson's

innovation has been to aggressively pursue content sharing deals with almost any other organization it can find, including its own competition. Thompson's strategy is to maximize the use of RNZ's outputs as:

'A good by-product of that is getting in front of people who we otherwise wouldn't be able to afford to connect with' (Thompson, 2018).

Thompson also alludes to the 'public good' in the approach that connects to a wider vision of public journalism having responsibilities beyond their own organizations and audiences, claiming:

'we think it has worked, and I also think it has helped the media environment and media outlets in New Zealand at a time when they're under a bit of pressure. It has given them some good content for their audiences' (Thompson, 2018).

SLIDE Checkpoint

Technology is also enabling the spread of RNZ's outputs as it deliberately uses new platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and live streaming to push out shows and other content. 'Checkpoint' is the evening news and current affairs show with a 50-year history of setting news agendas that captures the most listeners in its 5-6.30pm timeslot. A recent refresh has seen a well-known television journalist, John Campbell, front the show as it moved to incorporate visual aspects such as live streaming, video reportage and long form video journalism only available online.

Slide CHECKPOINT STUDIO

However, these new potentials are yet to fully gel at RNZ. There is a notable lack of television production values on these shows as the translation of hosts sitting in radio studio does not look as polished as the typical television news and current affairs efforts. Location-based reporting is also hamstrung by a lack of polish and perhaps too much reliance on new technology, with correspondents streaming shaky reports from iPhones and a heavy reliance of describing what is happening on screen for radio audiences as well as a heavy reliance on static slides instead of video footage. The overall effect is unpolished for both visual and aural audiences.

New website

The new website was launched in 2016 and beyond a design refresh, it has also benefitted from the new staffing approach and the inclusion of all RNZ outputs, updated through the 24-hour broadcast cycle and the inclusion of extra material such as video and custom-made web content that was never intended for the broadcast channels. Comics, animations, podcasts, feature interviews and other material is now organized by 'Topics', an innovation away from the 'programmes' meme that can trap content in radiogenic warehouses.

Audiences

While there has been some decline in broadcast audiences, in line with commercial radio audiences in New Zealand, there has been significant growth in the online audiences for Radio New Zealand, reflecting not just engagement with broadcast material but heavy engagement with content never intended for broadcast. This is the most significant difference between my critique in 2007 and now – RNZ has developed an exclusive online audience that never existed before, which is replacing its traditional reliance of broadcast listeners. This points to a future for RNZ that is shifted significantly online and includes more multimedia content that seeks to engage audiences beyond their ears.

SLIDES RNZ AUDIENCES

This research reveals significant changes in both the amount of people using the website and how it is used, as well as definitive shifts in the design and use of audio and other content elements available through the website. The remarkable increase in audience uptake of web-based programming generated by Radio New Zealand is a complex reaction to critical changes at the organization, but also changes in digital technologies and how contemporary media audiences use them. This research provides more insights into how radio is transforming in the multi-platform, and arguably, increasingly platform-neutral digital environment.

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